



COALITION FOR SMARTER GROWTH

Testimony before a the Joint Public Hearing of the Prince George's County Council
and Planning Board regarding:

Takoma/Langley Crossroads Preliminary Sector Plan, March 2009

At the County Administration Building
14741 Governor Oden Bowie Drive
Upper Marlboro, Maryland

By Cheryl Cort, Policy Director
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Please accept these comments on behalf of the Coalition for Smarter Growth, a regional non-profit organization focused on ensuring that transportation and development accommodate growth while revitalizing communities, providing more housing and travel choices, and conserving our natural and historic areas.

We support the vision of this plan -- "achieve a transit-oriented and pedestrian-friendly community that celebrates and builds on cultural diversity of the existing and future residents." We are excited about the coming bus transit center and future Purple Line stations. We share the county's aspiration for this plan to spark redevelopment and boost economic development on outdated automobile-oriented strip malls; building higher density, vibrant, mixed use places that are inviting for pedestrians. We agree with the plan's emphasis on the need to improve connectivity and create a compact, walkable environment. We believe redevelopment of key commercial parcels around the planned transit stations offers great opportunity to foster an attractive walking environment, with new jobs, businesses and housing.

We have, however, several concerns and recommendations for strengthening the plan.

Retaining small businesses and preserving housing

While the plan is a good beginning, it falls far short of ensuring that small businesses are retained and families can stay in their homes and their children can continue to attend nearby schools. Instead, the plan could lead to large-scale redevelopment of thousands of apartments that are home to the families that give Langley Park its distinct vitality. We need to ensure that improving Langley Park includes working with the majority of its residents -- thousands of families living here, attending local schools; shopping at, working and running local businesses. We also need to ensure the small ethnic businesses that make the community a regional destination are retained as a part of future economic development plans.

Recommendations:

Small Businesses: Adopt incentive zoning – zoning that provides a small density base, and offers a large increase up to a maximum limit if public benefits are provided, including retaining small local businesses. Other jurisdictions have done this through the zoning and development review process. Montgomery County is currently adopting a commercial/residential mixed use zone that provides

incentive zoning for retaining small businesses. This can also be accomplished through a Community Benefits Overlay Zone.

Housing Preservation: We welcome the plan’s recommendation to create an affordability workgroup and would like to help this group succeed. We believe, however, that the plan must have a clearer goal statement to preserve and improve existing rental housing. Preserving and improving the quality of the approximately 4500 rental apartment units in the plan area can be accomplished in the short term by more effective code enforcement. In the long term, improving the quality of the housing stock and maintaining affordability can be accomplished by leveraging programs like Low Income Housing Tax Credits and other assistance suggested in the plan. While some renters can become homeowners, many households will continue to depend on the availability of rental housing in this area. Instead of slating large portions of the multifamily housing neighborhoods for rezoning, we suggest focusing higher density development around the transit stations to bring more market rate housing and commercial space to the area.

Creating workforce housing in new mixed use development can be accomplished through incentive zoning or an overlay zone that sets a required level of below-market rate units as a part of new residential development. This kind of policy is practiced in hundreds of jurisdictions throughout the country and generally known as “Inclusionary Zoning.” In D.C., the law requires 8-10 percent of new residential development be affordable to households earning 50-80 percent of the Area Median Income (AMI) with a 20 percent density bonus; in Montgomery County, the longstanding Moderately Price Dwelling Unit (MPDU) law requires 12.5–15 percent of residential development be affordable at 65 percent of AMI, with an up to a 22 percent density bonus.

Improving connectivity - focus on pedestrian connectivity

While we agree with the plan’s priority to improve connectivity, this can be accomplished by focusing on pedestrian access and pedestrian pathways throughout the plan area, but not necessarily streets for vehicles. While street connections should be made where they can, specifically on commercial parcels proposed for redevelopment, streets should not be proposed where apartment buildings currently exist.

Recommendations:

We ask the county use the recommendations of the 2007 Pedestrian Access and Mobility Plan which proposed several new street segments on commercial parcels and additional pedestrian/bicycle access on existing streets and possible connections and trials. We also recommend formalizing and enhancing existing informal pedestrian pathways to create the needed connectivity for residents to walk to bus stops, the commercial core, schools, and other destinations.

Focus growth on key redevelopment commercial parcels

The plan seeks to create a defined center and sense of place through guiding building designs, street designs, mix of uses and creating public spaces. While the plan identifies proposed TOD zones 1 & 2, and other zones, it could provide a more specific analysis of the individual properties and their potential to achieve the plan’s goals. The plan proposes rezoning large areas to moderate densities throughout the plan area to meet the projected demand for future office, retail and residential needs.

Recommendation:

We suggest that the plan focus higher densities at the key commercial parcels around the transit center, Riggs Road station, and possibly other nearby commercial parts of University Boulevard. This could help encourage redevelopment of commercial sites and reinforce a sense of place, pedestrian-oriented focal points around the transit stations, and anchor the international corridor as a local and regional destination. By focusing higher densities around the transit stations, the plan area can support a stronger

center while generating more incentive to redevelop to higher value buildings. This will create a strong tax base. Higher densities in the mixed use commercial corridors also help protect surrounding apartment buildings that can retain a mix of more affordable housing choices.

Create Langley Market House at the Transit Station

A market house is indicated on several of the maps in the plan but it does not emerge as a recommendation.

Recommendation:

We suggest that the plan identify a public market house as a recommendation at the transit station at University and New Hampshire. A market house would have several benefits: it could incubate small local businesses, anchor in a prominent place the international identity of the community, and serve as a community gathering place that reflects the traditions of many immigrant communities.

Conclusion

Overall, this plan offers exciting opportunities to create new vibrant, walkable transit-oriented centers, building on new transit service and future demand to live and work close to the core of our metropolitan region. The plan, however, falls short in fully recognizing the value of the families living in the many apartment complexes and their contribution to the vitality and future potential of the area. We ask that incentive zoning or a zoning overlay be instituted to ensure that existing residents and the many distinctive small businesses can stay and benefit from future economic development, and contribute to this growth.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.